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ABSTRACT

Florida educators, parents, and school board members are intensely debating the issue of tracking and ability grouping. After summarizing recent research affirming the deleterious effects of ability grouping, this report describes a survey of 600 Florida educators regarding their perceptions of this practice and their beliefs about its effectiveness and efficacy. The stratified random sample was equally divided among teachers, school principals, and central office supervisors and represented the state geographically, socioeconomically, and educationally (by levels). The survey, which had a 49 percent response rate (n=293), was divided into four parts: student characteristics; district or school grouping practices; respondent's perspectives on homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping; and additional aspects of grouping practices in the respondent's school or district. The results suggest that students in Florida's public schools experience a substantial amount of ability grouping that escalates as they move from elementary grades on through high school. The majority of Florida educators appear to be opposed to ability grouping as currently practiced and supportive of heterogeneous approaches, but are uncertain about the effectiveness of alternatives. Florida educators are also anxious about the resistance they receive from parents of gifted and talented students and from vocal, influential teachers and administrators opposed to heterogeneous grouping. (Contains 51 references.) (MLH)

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FLORIDA EDUCATIONAL
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RESEARCH BULLETIN

Tracking and Ability Grouping in Florida: Educator's Perceptions

by

Paul S. George and Kim Rubin

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Tracking and Ability Grouping in Florida: Educator's Perceptions

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F.E.R.C. NOTES ON THIS BULLETIN

Paul George and Kim Rubin have addressed an age old topic in a new and time manner. This scholarly work reveals the conflict and frustration Florida educators have in dealing with the ability grouping demands by certain elements in society. This research bulletin is certainly germane to this issue and deserves the full attention of all who are interested in public education.

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Tracking and Ability Grouping in Florida: Educator's Perceptions

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Abstract

The investigators surveyed 600 Florida educators regarding their perceptions of the practice of ability grouping in the state and their beliefs about the effectiveness and the efficacy of that organizational strategy. The results suggest that students in Florida's public schools experience a substantial amount of ability grouping as a part of their education, with the amount of grouping escalating as they move from the early elementary school on to the high school. A great deal of discussion about ability grouping and efforts to change these practices is underway in the state. The majority of Florida educators appear to be opposed to ability grouping as it is currently practiced and supportive of heterogeneous approaches, but they are uncertain of the effectiveness of alternatives. Florida educators are also anxious about the resistance they receive from parents of gifted and talented students, and from vocal and influential teachers and administrators who are opposed to heterogeneous grouping.

Introduction

Educators, parents, and school board members in Florida are intensely interested in the topic of tracking and ability grouping[1]. A number of factors have combined to create this high level of interest: changing demographics among the student and parent populations in the state; concerns about equity and access to the resources and opportunities schools offer to their students; concerns about the needs of gifted and talented learners and the efficacy of current programs for these students; increased sensitivity about academic achievement; and awareness of the debates about tracking and ability grouping occurring at the national level. Few issues, other than adequate funding for school programs in general, seem more prominent.

In dozens, perhaps hundreds, of schools in Florida, the lines are being drawn for what may be a protracted struggle over whether and to what extent students in those schools will be organized for instruction on the basis of perceived ability or prior achievement of those students. The opponents of rigid ability grouping argue against what they perceive to be the inequities and inadequacies of the education received by students in the lower groups; they push for more heterogeneous classrooms, ones which reflect the social and intellectual diversity of the school's student population. They cite research to support their views. Defenders of ability grouping, as it currently exists in many Florida schools, are most frequently advocates for students who are perceived to be exceptionally able, academically. Advocates for these gifted and talented students argue that heterogeneous classrooms prohibit such students from attaining the degree of educational excellence that their ability and their motivation make potentially possible. They cite research to support their views.

Florida's teachers and administrators also appear to be divided in their beliefs about the efficacy of ability grouping. Some educators believe that it is impossible for teachers to teach effectively in classrooms where the range of ability and achievement is too great, and they cite their own professional experience as proof. Others argue that the act of ability grouping makes some classes, usually the lower tracks, virtually impossible to teach, and they, too, cite their own professional experience as proof. The debates in which all of these groups engage are often accompanied by considerable acri-

mony, antipathy, animosity, and antagonism; advocates are absolutely convinced of the truth and justice of the perspective they advocate and that the perspective of the "other side" is totally specious and without merit. Unfortunately, the real losers in these debates, as they heat up around the country, may be the students in Florida's schools.

Decisions about how Florida's learners should be grouped to receive instruction ought to be based on the accumulated evidence indicating the best available practices, informed by data provided by careful research and the distillation of professional experience in this area. What does research say? What has experience proved? What do we know about the practice of ability grouping in Florida—really? Unfortunately, the jury is not yet in with the final verdict; no once-and-for-all rendering of the truth is possible, from the research and experience that has accumulated to date in Florida or elsewhere. In addition, information is lacking on the current practices and the perceptions held by Florida educators on the topic of tracking and ability grouping. In fact, there appears to be very little information on the extent to which such practices are actually used in schools anywhere in America or on the perceptions which educators hold about the efficacy and equity of such practices. Making reasonable decisions about grouping students becomes difficult in such circumstances.

The purpose of this monograph is to briefly summarize the research on ability grouping and to present the results of a survey of the practices and perceptions of Florida educators on this topic. When educators and policymakers are clear about what we know, what we practice, and what we believe, informed and effective decisions about school improvement can be made more smoothly and more effectively.

Part One: Research on Ability Grouping: A Summary[2]

Few aspects of education have received more attention from researchers than has ability grouping. In fact, there may be more reviews of the research on grouping than there are actual studies on other subjects. Over the last half century or so, there may have been as many as 500 or more studies of tracking and ability grouping. Reviews of this massive literature base were conducted as long ago as 1936, with the thirty-fifth yearbook of the National Society for the

Study of Education (Whipple, 1936), and as recently as 1992 (Kulik, 1992). As with any literature of this size, drawing unequivocable conclusions is difficult, if not impossible. It is certainly impossible to conclude, once and for all, that ability grouping either does or does not work, "as though it is a one-time choice between clear-cut alternatives: either a beneficent endeavor . . . or . . . an inherently inequitable placement (Page, 1991)." Educators must, however, utilize whatever data is available, inconclusive though it may be. What follows in this section is a summary of what we believe is suggested by a careful and unbiased reading of the research.

Identification and placement of students into ability groups is far more difficult to accomplish, fairly and accurately, than often thought to be the case. Jeannie Oakes (1985) identified the serious deficiencies in the process which most schools use to identify and place students into tracks. Too often, for example, test score differences are used as the sole criterion for grouping practices, when these differences do not reflect really significant differences in the amount of intelligence or achievement which separates different students. For many years in the state of Florida, for example, a student who achieves a score of 130 on an I.Q. test has usually been classified as gifted, and a student who scores 129 may often not have received that designation. The absolute amount of intelligence represented by a test score difference of one point is infinitesimally small, but huge differences in educational opportunities and experiences are accorded to Florida's students on the basis of those scores.

In 1990, the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy, financed by the Ford Foundation and chaired by Bernard R. Gifford, Vice President of Apple Computers, concluded that the standardized testing often used for grouping purposes "often results in unfairness in the allocation of educational opportunities, lacks adequate public accountability, too often undermines vital social policies, harms minorities and hinders school reform, and uses too much time and distorts the educational process." Other examinations of standardized tests, such as the SAT, have also recently come under scrutiny for purported weaknesses which favor students of one gender or socioeconomic status.

Although it may not be substantiated by research, most experienced educators would also agree, we believe, that too often group placement is influenced by the socioeconomic status or local political influence of the parents of students being grouped. Children of the

poor are, in many schools, often without the spirited advocacy of educated, affluent parents who understand the importance of group placement, who have the time to make their wishes known to teachers, counselors, and principals, and who have the status in the community to secure the placement they wish for their child. Many children have parents who do not understand the difference one teacher or class can make. They may live 15 miles away from the school to which their children are bussed; they may not have a car to take them there. They may have two jobs, or a job which they will lose if they take time off to go to school to investigate their child's placement. They may be intimidated by majority culture masters degree holders who have positions of professional importance, and defer to their judgment when it may not be in the best interest of their children. They may, tragically, no longer care about the education of their children. For whatever reason, these students do not have the same advocacy as many others and, in the real world, may be placed in a group or track because no one has come to the school to dispute it or to suggest alternatives.

However identification and placement occur, many educators agree that in schools with substantially diverse student populations, and Florida's student population appears to grow more diverse each year, poor and minority students may end up in the lower tracks or ability groups in numbers which exceed their representation in the school population as a whole. Unless we accept the unacceptable, that poor and minority students are by their nature or experience less able to achieve in school than more affluent and majority culture students, such a situation cannot be tolerated. This is especially so in a school and society which, to date, remains officially dedicated to the proposition that all children can learn what the school has to teach.

Once placed in a group, it appears that students are increasingly unlikely to be moved to a supposedly faster group. It is a "locked in/locked out" situation. In fact, one comprehensive review of grouping in the middle grades (Dentzer & Wheelock, 1990) found this to be so likely that the authors chose those words as the title of the manuscript. More than 20 years ago, a benchmark study by an anthropologist (Rist, 1970) painted an abysmal picture of the meager amount of data teachers use to group students, and how long those group placements remain intact. We believe that the experience of most public school educators squares with this documentation. Once

placed in low groups, students rapidly and continually fall further and further behind, making movement out of such groups virtually impossible. Placing Florida's students in ability groups in the early elementary years may virtually guarantee the continuation of those placements through the end of high school.

Ability grouping unnecessarily downplays the importance of student, teacher, and parent effort, and unjustifiably emphasizes individual student ability. Comparisons of grouping methods and academic achievement in other countries, with ours, find some significant differences (George, 1989; Stevenson & Lee, 1990). These comparisons indicate that parents and teachers in Japan and Taiwan, for example, attribute student and school success or failure to inadequate effort. When students there do poorly, they are exhorted to "gambare" (i.e., work harder, persist, "endure with effort"). Slower students must simply try harder; no one expects them to be removed from the classroom for special interventions, or to make it easier for faster to students to move ahead more quickly. There is, to date, no ability grouping in Japanese schools prior to 10th grade. Japanese educators think it foolish to remove from the classroom the best models of hard work and high achievement.

Japanese and Taiwanese parents and teachers appear to believe that all children can, if they and their children try hard, learn at least the minimum the school expects, and in Japan and China students do just that. Of course, Asian students have a longer school day and a lengthier school year than Florida students do; meaning that Asian students work hard for longer periods of time each day and each year. We have also been told by Japanese psychologists, on a recent visit to Japan, that they believe that the widely publicized ten point superiority in I.Q. scores, of Japanese youth when compared to Americans, has nothing to do with differences in innate ability. They believe that it results from Japanese children being taught, from their earliest experiences, to persist in difficult situations, to keep at a problem until they get the answer. Consequently, when their students take intelligence tests, they simply work harder at getting the answers.

Ironically, American parents, and presumably Floridians, express more satisfaction with their schools than do either Japanese or Taiwanese parents, but their children achieve less academically. This yields a fascinating paradox: the parents of the most successful students are least satisfied with the school experience of their chil-

dren; the parents of the least successful students (Americans) express the most satisfaction with their children's school experience (Stevenson & Lee, 1990). American parents also seem to believe that they have less responsibility for the success of their children's learning experience than do parents in Asia, see less room for hard work on their own parts in helping their children persist, enduring with effort.

The very term "ability grouping" implies that students so organized can be expected to learn at very different rates, and most educators now recognize the tremendous power of expectations of the effort and success of both teachers and learners (Brophy, 1979). There is reason to believe, we think, that ability grouping lowers both expectations and effort, resulting in lower achievement for at least some groups of learners. To our knowledge, no school in Florida or elsewhere has attempted to group students on the basis of effort, and to do so would be probably as debilitating to the teaching and learning process as ability grouping may be.

Ability grouping may be related to substantial differences in student self-esteem. High-track students may have higher educational aspirations and more positive academic and personal self-concepts. Students in low-track classes are not so much critical of school as they are of their own abilities (Oakes, 1985). During the early elementary years, academic self-concept is at its peak, declining in subsequent years, accelerated for less successful learners at least in part as a consequence of being assigned to a series of low-track classes year after year (Marsh, 1989). It appears that academic self-concept for students in low tracks becomes more and more negative as each year passes. If schools should, at a minimum, do no harm to how students perceive themselves as they pass through the years, ability group falls short of that obligation.

Academic achievement does not appear to improve with the use of ability grouping. Most of the research on ability grouping focuses on this aspect, and the conclusions one draws seem to depend on which portion of the research is read, which researchers one respects, and the groups of students for which one is an advocate. Slavin (1990) concludes that ability grouping has little or no effect on achievement, that all forms of ability grouping are equally ineffective in all subjects. Rogers (1991), on the other hand, argues that research on grouping indicates that gifted and talented students benefit from the practice.

We believe, after reading analyses of the research by Slavin (1987, 1990), Noland & Taylor (1986), Oakes (1985, 1990), Gamoran & Behrends (1987), Rogers (1991), Kulik & Kulik (1987), and many others, that except for situations in which students receive the very best learning situations a school can offer, ability grouping fails to deliver increased academic achievement. When advanced students are grouped together for acceleration, and provided with the best teacher, the best classroom learning climate, the most enriched curriculum, state of the art instruction and learning resources (e.g., computers), they learn more than they otherwise would. But who would not? Under these circumstances, it may be that it is not the act of grouping which delivers the benefits, but the resources devoted to the achievement of a particular group.

Ability grouping may lead to racial, ethnic, and income isolation. Even if tracking produced higher academic achievement for most of Florida's students (which does not seem to occur) and more positive self-esteem for all groups (which does not seem to happen), it would still be undesirable and unacceptable educational practice if it led to schools where students were separated, even isolated, according to racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic attributes. In many Florida schools and school districts, we fear that grouping practices result in the over-representation of poor and minority group children in the lower tracks, and majority culture, higher income group children in the higher tracks. Tracking in this way would effectively isolate these children from one another, sometimes so much that it results in the racial resegregation of the school, inside the building. When this happens, it must be wrong, regardless of the outcomes for achievement or self-esteem (Metz, 1983; Oakes, 1985).

Ability grouping may contribute to the destruction of a sense of community in school and out. When students are grouped in ways which result in isolation by factors which resemble the same separations found in Florida as a whole, it is not unreasonable to fear that fabric of the school's sense of community will fray. As students pass year after year organized in ways which separate them, even unintentionally, by race, ethnic group, or socioeconomic status, student groups become polarized into pro-and-anti-school camps (Gamoran & Behrends, 1987, 426) which become increasingly estranged from one another. One group achieves success in the classroom, the other finds success in the hallways and playgrounds. Even more unfortunately, such attitudes may harden into peer group norms, which

lead to alienation, vandalism, violence, and misunderstandings which develop into lifelong prejudices. In a state like Florida, becoming increasingly multicultural and pluralistic, this must not be permitted; the consequences for adult social life will be disastrous if it is left to continue unchecked.

Grouping may deliver the school's learning resources in fundamentally unfair and inequitable ways. Compared to the so-called average or standard classes, class sizes of advanced and remedial sections seem, in many schools, to be much smaller. The status attached to membership in these different class groups is incontestably highest in the advanced groups and lowest in basic and remedial sections. In the advanced groups, time on task is most certainly much higher and a positive climate for learning, with appropriately high expectations for success, is clearly more likely to be in place. One need only recall the TV situation comedy ("Welcome Back Kotter") featuring the "Sweat Hogs" to realize how difficult teaching becomes when the class represents a "critical mass of discouragement." That such a situation could become a highly successful comedy, making fun of discouraged learners, is sad, indeed.

The essential inequity of ability grouping may extend to the way in which teachers are assigned to classes grouped in various ways. Assigning teachers, it seems, may be at least as much a political process in many schools as it is a pedagogical one. In educational organizations, with few levels of professional advancement available, assignment to teaching the students one prefers is one of the few career incentives which principals can use to reward the more successful and experienced teachers on a staff (Darling-Hammond, 1988). Both evidence and experience suggest that teachers strongly prefer to teach advanced classes. In one study, only 3% of the teachers expressed an interest in teaching the low ability groups (Findley and Bryan, 1975). Charged with maintaining the motivation of the teaching staff, many school principals assign the most successful teachers to teaching the most successful students, and the least successful (or unproven and inexperienced) staff members are assigned to the students who have had the most difficulty.

This is combined, all too often we worry, with the need for the principal to pacify politically powerful or otherwise influential parents. In many school districts it appears that an unspoken obligation of the school principal is to keep angry parents away from the central office. Too many angry, influential parents pounding on the

superintendent's door can often develop into a career-limiting situation for school administrators. So when certain parents request that their students have specific teachers, principals may be receptive. In defense of school principals, this may also be the case simply because these parents understand the difference one teacher can make, because they have the time to make the request, and because they are not intimidated abut contacting the school principal to make such a request.

It may be that Florida's school principals respond positively and helpfully to all requests, even those of poor and minority group parents when they make them. But poor and minority group parents, likely to have been unsuccessful in school themselves, may not appreciate the difference one teacher can make in the life of their child; they may not know they can make special placement requests. They may face language barriers, may have to surmount cultural barriers to dealing with authority figures. They may believe that educators are "experts" and defer, with unquestioning trust, to decisions made about their child. The facts seem to be that for whatever reason, students perceived as having less potential for successful learning may often be grouped together with teachers who have not established a record of success in teaching.

Innovative, state of the art instruction, is also distributed inequitably among classes with different ability groups. High-ability, high-achieving students are often perceived by teachers as receptive to unusual and creative teaching techniques; teachers believe that they can take instructional risks with such students because classroom behavior management is not a problem. Discouraged learners make teaching difficult, and high-risk strategies may be discarded in favor of learning methods which keep students still and quiet, lest things get out of control (Cooper, 1979).

It also seems clear that students in advanced classes may be exposed to a much more enriched curriculum than students in other sections. The books are different. The assignments are different. The richness and robustness of classroom discussions are significantly different. The fact that advanced students tend to come from more affluent homes means that students, themselves, have more enriched life experiences to bring to the classroom. Students in advanced classes are perceived as being "able to handle it." Oakes (1988, 43) summarizes the evidence:

> It appears, however, that only the most extraordinary average and low-level classes match the curriculum standards, learning opportunities, and classroom climates of even ordinary high-track classes.

Discouraged students grouped together in low-track classes resent their status, respond defensively, and refuse to engage in the very academic efforts which might bring them more success. Teachers, accurately perceiving the student's negativity and hostility, frequently respond in ways that actually increase the force of those factors. Good and Brophy (1987, 407) summarize:

> Even if teachers assigned to low-track classes do not have undesirable attitudes and expectations, they will find it difficult to establish effective learning environments in these classes because of the defeatism, alienation, and flat-out resistance they are likely to encounter there.

Jeannie Oakes (1985) made it clear that the "hidden" aspects of the curriculum are also distributed unfairly. The implicit curriculum in advanced classes may too often be a curriculum of taking control, of leadership, of learning to be more active, teaching students to take charge of their learning lives, to exercise choice, to manage their own learning so that they learn to manage themselves and, later, others. By contrast, the experiences of students in basic classes may be focused on learning to be more passive, to give up control of one's life, to be quiet, punctual, clean, and orderly. The hidden curriculum in the lower tracks seems ideal for preparing students for minimum wage labor opportunities, for being receptive to supervision and even, sadly, incarceration.

Some ability grouping practices may be illegal. Grouping patterns which are based on or contribute to the situations described above have been found to be illegal (Bryson & Bentley, 1980; Oakes, 1983). The courts have found that the use of standardized tests, especially when it results in racially identifiable classes, cannot be used for this purpose. Public labeling, and potential stigmatizing, of students by ability is prohibited. The courts have found that when ability groups result in the situations described in the above discussion, the burden of proof rests with school officials to prove that the practice has merit

and does not inappropriately discriminate. To be legally acceptable, grouping strategies must: use nondiscriminatory standards for identification and placement of students; evaluated regularly to determine their effectiveness and discontinued or altered when they are shown to be unable to produce desired results. All parents must be informed of the potential outcomes of specific placements for their children. Such groups must not be permanent, on a daily or yearly basis, students must be able to change groups without being discouraged by penalties or extra work, and the grouping strategies must be clearly related to instructional objectives being pursued in the classes. Few ability grouping practices in today's schools would, we believe, be able to meet this "burden of proof." In fact, the Office of Civil Rights, in the United States Department of Education, is currently working on procedures with regard to investigation and litigation in schools and districts where ability grouping leads to violation of Title IV regulations of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Part Two: Tracking and Ability Grouping in Florida: Perceptions of Educators

Design of the Study

The great majority of the research which has been conducted on the subject of tracking and ability grouping has focused on the relationship of these practices to academic achievement. A few other studies have examined sociological aspects of grouping practices. Little has been done, however, to investigate the extent to which these practices exist or the perceptions which educators hold regarding them. Insofar as the authors have been able to determine, no attempt has been made to discover the extent to which ability grouping is being practiced, or the relevant perceptions of educators, on a statewide basis; this has certainly not been done in Florida. Consequently, this study investigated the extent to which educators report such practices in their schools, and the perceptions they hold regarding those same practices.

First, six members of the Florida State Department were queried to determine if policies existed on the state level with regard to the practice of ability grouping. With the exception of a technical note focused on the subject of ability grouping and the education of gifted and talented students in the middle school, no such policies were

found. The essence of the technical note was that, in exemplary middle schools, the needs of gifted and talented students could be met without excessive ability grouping.[3]

In the fall of 1991, a 30-item questionnaire was mailed to a stratified random sample of 600 Florida educators, divided equally among teachers, school principals, and central office supervisors dispersed throughout the state. The sample represented the state geographically, socioeconomically, and in terms of the level of education (elementary, middle, and high school). The survey was divided into four parts: characteristics of students in the school or district; grouping practices in the school and district; respondent's perspectives on homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping; and, additional aspects of grouping practices in the respondent's school or district. The survey also provided opportunities for respondents to provide comments or additional information. The mailing was designed so that responses were completely anonymous, identifiable only as to the demographic characteristics of the school or district; we believe this may have encouraged respondents to be more disclosing on what may be a very sensitive subject. A total of 293 complete and usable questionnaires were returned following the one time mailing; no follow-up procedures were employed. A return rate of approximately 49 percent, under these circumstances, was deemed sufficient for the purposes of the study. Among respondents, 27.3% were classroom teachers; 36.5% were school building principals; and 36.1% were central office supervisors. In terms of the level of schooling represented, 35.8% were elementary educators, 13.3% were middle level educators, 14.7% were high school educators, and 34.1% represented a K-12 district supervisor's perspective. The returns also indicated that responses were received from educators working in schools and districts which represented the demographic diversity of the entire Florida public school system in terms of race, socioeconomic status, and school locale. Responses from the questionnaires were tabulated and cross-tabulated using the statistical program SPSS.[4] For the most part, simple percentages were sought.

Results of the Survey

Extent of Ability Grouping and Tracking

The first objective of the survey was to determine the perceptions

of educators as to the degree of ability grouping they believed to exist in their schools and districts. Four questions (5, 16, 28, and 29) sought data specifically on this issue. Question 5 asked respondents to estimate the "extent to which students spend their school day in groups organized by ability." The results are found in Table One. Taken as a group, Florida educators estimate that almost 24% of students in Florida schools spend a large part of their day in groups organized by ability. Over 81% of Florida's public school students, educators say, spend at least some part of their day learning in groups organized by ability. Educators judge that 17.1% of Florida students experience a school day uninvolved with between-class ability groups.

Cross tabulations by level of school (elementary, middle, or high) indicate, as noted, that such groupings increase dramatically as the level of schooling moves higher. Among teachers who indicated that students in their schools spent "most of the day" in ability groupings, 9.1% were at the elementary level, 18.2% were from the middle level, and 68.2% were from the high school level. No high school educator reported a-total absence of ability grouping, whereas 25% of the elementary teachers reported that, in their schools, students were ability grouped in no subjects. The patterns reported by principals and supervisors were in the same direction, but substantially stronger. That is, both principals and supervisors reported that ability grouping occurred much more frequently at the high school level than at either the middle or elementary levels. Sixty-two percent of high school principals, for example, reported that students in their schools were grouped by ability "most of the day."

Question 16 asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statement "Most of the students in my school(s) are scheduled into classes according to ability." Of those responding either "agree" or "disagree," 37.3% agreed and 62.7% disagreed. Upon closer examination, 25% of elementary school teachers agreed that students are placed in their classes according to ability and more than double (56.3%) of high school teaches saw it the same way. Florida educators, it seems, perceive a substantial amount of ability grouping in their schools; this grouping is, however, directly related to the level of schooling involved.

For Question 16, the returns indicated that teachers perceived a great deal more ability grouping in their schools (48.7%) than did either principals (26.6%) or supervisors (39.0%). These different

perceptions may be related to the broader perspective and more in-depth information available to school and district leaders, or it may be that teachers are more informed as to how students are actually grouped on an hourly and daily basis. Here, and often in responses to other questions, teachers report the situation differently than do principals and supervisors.

Responses to Questions 28 and 29 yielded substantial agreement from all three professional groups. According to responses to question 28, a majority of respondents (68.2%) agreed that, in Florida high schools, "students are grouped into one of three tracks: vocational, general, or college preparatory." Looking further into grouping in high school, Question 29 asked whether respondents agreed that "in high schools in my district, college preparatory courses are grouped according to regular, honors, and advanced placement levels; 91.1% of all respondents agreed that this was the case in their high schools.

Table One: Perceptions of Florida Educators as to the Percentage of the Day in Which Schools Organize Students by Ability

All day	.7
Most of the day/Most subjects	23.9
Small part of the day	56.7
No subjects	17.1
Not applicable/Missing data	1.7

Respondents' written comments consistently supported the perception that the practice of ability grouping in Florida schools differs in type and degree depending on the level of schooling. These four supervisors' comments seem fairly representative:

> We handle grouping differently at each level of instruction in the [county]. There is no grouping at the elementary level except ESE. At the middle level, all students are homogeneously grouped in math and reading and ESE. At the high school level, grouping exists at all levels and all subjects.

Our middle and elementary schools use heterogeneous classes except for pre-algebra and algebra in two of our four middle schools. Our largest high school 'tracks' kids until graduation or drop out.

Elementary schools in our district are heterogenous except for pullouts such as Chapter 1, ESOL, etc. Middle schools have just begun this year to heterogeneously group basic and regular students while keeping advanced and gifted students separate. High school students are effectively tracked by the state course offerings although we are attempting to begin to eliminate basic courses.

... the K-6, 7-8, 9-12 situations are very different. K-6 generally not formally grouped, but some grouping occurs indirectly due to parent requests and attempt to level some reading instruction. 7-8 ability grouping (advanced vs. regular) only in math and English. 9-12 complete ability grouping, except for a few electives and PE.

Changing the Grouping Plan

Florida educators, along with those in many other states, appear to be embroiled in an examination of the whole issue of ability grouping and the effect ability grouping has in their schools. Questions 6-9, therefore, dealt with the issues of school restructuring, in terms of ability grouping. These questions focused on whether the schools were considering restructuring toward heterogeneous grouping, whether moves had already been made to do so, the attitude of the respondent toward such reorganization, and reasons why the school had or had not engaged in such a transition.

Question 6 asked whether educators in the schools were "considering a reorganization of student class assignment to a more heterogeneous model." Taken as a whole group, 34.4 percent of Florida's educators see their schools as involved in such a consideration, while 65.6 percent report that they are not involved in such considerations. It appears that one's professional responsibilities influence the degree to which one perceives that the schools are involved in these

considerations. Only 29% of Florida teachers believe their schools are considering changing to a more heterogeneous model, while 49% of central office supervisors assert that such considerations are underway. It may be that central office planners and policy makers are involved in such study and discussion and that these considerations have not reached the school level to the same degree.

Question 7 asked whether the schools had "recently been reorganized into a more heterogeneous model" beyond the level of discussion or consideration. Taken as a whole, nearly half (47%) of Florida educators perceive that their schools have recently moved toward a more inclusive, heterogeneous model. Here, too, however, the professional role of the respondents made a difference in their reported perceptions. The closer one is to the classroom, the less movement toward heterogeneity one perceives: 39% of classroom teachers reported experiencing school reorganization; 41.7% of school principals did so; and 55.5% of district level supervisors reported reorganization underway. These differences in perceptions may, again, be the result of being more informed at the school or district leadership level, or it may be that such leaders "see" more reorganization than teachers experience at the classroom level. Nevertheless, it seems clear that many Florida schools have been involved in attempts to move toward less rigid, homogeneous grouping patterns.

Question 8 explored the extent to which respondents who have experienced these changes supported the change toward heterogeneity. Again, as a whole group, Florida educators experiencing such changes report strong support for these activities, with 86.5% reporting such support, and only 13.5% voicing lack of support for the reported changes. Professional role, however, was important here as well: 71.8% of the classroom teachers voiced their support for the changes, while 90.7% of principals, and 98.9% of central office supervisors did so. Clearly, teachers are not unsupportive of these changes; school principals and central office supervisors are overwhelmingly so. Cross tabulations illustrated the importance of school level: 56.3% of the teachers who were supportive of such changes in their schools were at the elementary level; 61.5% of the teachers who did not support such changes in their schools were at the high school. Restructuring Florida schools to accommodate more heterogeneity in learning groups and support for such changes when they occur appears, primarily, to be a phenomenon of the elementary (and to some degree middle level) school.

Educators in schools where ability grouping is being practiced are not so certain that their colleagues support heterogeneous grouping. Question 21 asked respondents to evaluate the statement that "the majority of teachers in my school [or district] support the homogeneous organization (ability grouping) of students. A majority (64.4%) agreed that this was so; 35.6% disagreed. Question 9 asked educators, in schools where such changes had not taken place, to speculate on the reasons which may have kept their school(s) from changing in the direction of greater heterogeneity in learning groups. Since 47% of the respondents had indicated an involvement in such change, persons responding to this question (9) were those who had indicated lack of such involvement. Respondents were asked to choose the one factor which had "been most instrumental in keeping [the school] from changing" Table Two summarizes the results of Question 9. Of the options they were given, the entire group of respondents seems to indicate that teacher preferences were seen as more responsible for lack of movement than other factors. But this interpretation seems less accurate when specific professional roles are examined. Teachers, as a group, seem to think that it is the administration's decision that is most responsible for lack of restructuring. School principals, on the other hand, attribute lack of change primarily to the preferences of teachers for the status quo. Central office supervisors, however, seem to think that parent pressures favoring homogeneous grouping are responsible for the schools remaining in homogeneous groupings. Taken as a group, all Florida educators seem to attribute lack of change almost equally to the three factors. Examined in terms of professional responsibilities, however, each group identifies someone else as the primary reason for the lack of change. In particular, teachers and school principals ascribed the primary reason for the lack of change to the other.

Table Two: Educator Perceptions as to Factors Limiting Change to Greater Heterogeneity in Their Schools (Percentages)

	Parent Pressure	Teacher Preference	Administrator Decision	Other
All Educators	27.1	38.8	24.2	.09
Teachers	26.0	30.0	40.0	1.0
Principals	12.0	56.0	20.0	12.0
Supervisors	40.4	38.0	19.0	2.6

Two questions dealt with the readiness of teachers to participate with competence and confidence in the heterogeneous grouping instructional process. Question 14 asked respondents to agree or disagree with this statement: "Inservice education and staff development, as it is usually provided, in and of itself, does not usually provide thorough and effective preparation for teachers to be successful in a heterogenous classroom." As a group, 64.9% of Florida educators agreed with this statement. Question 15 asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement "Teachers would be more willing to teach mixed ability classes if they had proper amounts of planning time, reasonable class sizes, and effective staff development." A sizable majority of Florida educators agreed (85.8%) with this statement.

In some cases, written comments virtually begged for more support before moving fully into heterogeneous instruction. One teacher wrote:

> It is difficult because of these large numbers [33 in my class] to meet everyone's needs. Monies must be appropriated to reduce class sizes so we can all do the best job for all the children. Please do not add more to our curriculum unless you give us more time to do the job we are hired to do.

An elementary principal voiced concern for the absence of effec-

tive staff development for the teachers now in the classroom:

> Although I support cooperative learning and non-tracking of students, the transition takes time. Many teachers (veterans as well as beginners) are not comfortable or willing to either learn nor constantly implement it. As universities begin emphasizing the model in teacher training classes, perhaps more will use it properly in the future. In the meantime—what do we do for the current generation [of teachers] and those in the near future?

A middle school principal said, "We have read considerably on the subject. We need solid, practical (don't need theory, we believe already) ongoing inservice for our teachers." A district supervisor described what seems to be the sort of inservice this middle school principal sought. In this district, the supervisor said, staff development was comprehensive and continuing:

> Our district has been active in trying to provide our schools with the most up-to-date research and literature on ability grouping and heterogeneous grouping. The district maintains a resource library of articles, books, and videos for check out. Packets of information for parents are also available for schools to check out. Resources for all teachers on cooperative learning and enrichment are available. Extensive training in cooperative learning is ongoing. Our district has created training manuals. Resources for teachers are available from the district to work with parents and schools. Schools are made aware of upcoming conferences and workshops. District administrators recently attended a presentation on tracking. A workshop is scheduled to share successful strategies for heterogeneous classes.

Practitioners' Beliefs About Ability Grouping

A number of the survey questions focused on what respondents believed about ability grouping, as a result of their experiences in

Florida schools. Question 11, for example, had five subparts, all of which dealt with educators' beliefs about "homogeneous (ability-based) grouping as a method of instructional organization." Respondents were asked in Question 11A to agree or disagree with the statement "Students learn better if they learn with others with similar capabilities." As a group, 67.6% of the respondents disagreed with this statement, 32.4% agreeing. Within groups there was a continuing difference, with a majority of classroom teachers agreeing (57.5%) that students learn best with peers of similar abilities. Principals and central office supervisors, however, disagreed (72% and 76.2%, respectively). The strongest disagreement in terms of levels of schooling came from the elementary teachers and principals. One elementary school principal wrote:

> I believe students do learn from one another and in groups with children from different socioeconomic and backgrounds. It creates an environment which will enrich the children's appreciation for one another and a tolerance for individual differences which will help these children as they grow up in our diverse society. Wouldn't it be nice if one day we didn't have racial prejudice?

Question 11B asked respondents to react to the statement "Slower children develop poor self-concepts when placed with brighter children." Here, all three professional groups disagreed. As a total group, 80.7% disagreed with the statement and 19.3% agreed. Once again, principals' (84.1%) and supervisors' disagreement (84.8%) registered more strongly than teacher feelings (63.8% disagreed). Florida educators do not seem to believe that slower students risk damage to their self-esteem when placed with higher achieving children. Here again, however, it is important to remember that support for ability grouping grows as the level of education involved grows higher. One principal of a K-12 school, for example, put it more forcefully than high school educators might:

> I despise homogeneous grouping in the elementary. I know it is easier for teachers but it definitely stigmatizes children. Once labeled, these children rarely break the bond [of the self-fulfilling prophesy].

On Question 11C respondents voiced their belief about the fairness of ability grouping as it is usually practiced. Given the statement, "Ability grouping is usually fair and equal, 71.6% of the total group of respondents rejected the statement, and 28.4% did not reject it. Here, too, professional responsibilities may have played a role in the responses. A small majority of teachers (53.2%) agreed that ability grouping was usually fair and equal; 75.7% of principals and 80% of supervisors disagreed. Many teachers believe ability grouping is fair and equal; few principals and supervisors do.

The majority of respondents rejected the assertion that ability grouping leads to higher academic achievement for all students. As a group, 74.2% rejected the statement that "ability grouping increases all students' achievement." Once again, however, the opinions of teachers and those of principals and supervisors diverge sharply. A simple majority of Florida teachers (52.5%) appear to agree that ability grouping does lead to higher achievement for all students, but 72.9% of principals and 88.6% of supervisors reject this notion. Here, too, elementary educators were most rejecting of the notion that ability grouping leads to higher achievement for all students.

Question 11E asked respondents to evaluate the statement "Ability grouping reduces complexity of teaching tasks related to student diversity." A majority of the total group (67.9%) agreed with the statement, 32.1% disagreed. In this instance, as well, professional role was related to the strength of the responses. Teachers agreed with the statement most strongly (72.5%), while 67.3% of principals and 57.1% of supervisors agreed. It seems that the closer the respondent is to the actual responsibility of planning for diverse groups of learners, the stronger the feeling about how ability grouping reduces the complexity of the teaching tasks. One teacher put it this way:

> During my teaching career, a span of over 12 years, I have been involved with both heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings. I see very substantial benefits in the heterogeneous classroom; and though it frequently challenges my planning, the rewards far outweigh the implications. Where would ESOL be without heterogeneous activity (all share the same) . . . and where would the striving to be one's best be if we all competed without 'mirror images'? Life is a

collage and the classroom is life . . . that collage.

Another set of statements (Question 12) sought responses to statements related to "heterogeneous (mixed ability) grouping as a method of instructional organization." Question 12A asked Florida educators to agree or disagree with the statement that "students learn from peers with different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds." Agreement with this statement was particularly strong, with 92.9% of all respondents in agreement. Eighty percent of teachers agreed, while 94.4% of principals and 95.2% of supervisors did so. Not all teachers felt this way, as with the high school teacher who wrote:

> All students are not born with the same levels of learning ability in all subject areas. Some students are skill-oriented versus intellectual-oriented, so why force them to study in areas and at levels that are not interesting to them? This is why we have student apathy and a high drop-out rate! Our present system is stupid! Florida needs to learn by example and implement the successful European education systems!

Another commented:

> We need to provide the best educational environment we can for the better students. These students are the ones who will be the future leaders of this country. We need to avoid penalizing them because the other students need to be helped. Other methods [than heterogeneous grouping] need to be developed for the slower students which will not slow or hamper the better students.

"Higher level students do as well in mixed classes as in homogeneous settings" was the statement associated with Question 12B. As a group, 74.4% of respondents agreed, and 24.2% disagreed. Here a majority of teachers agreed (68.2%), as did principals (78.6%) and supervisors (75%), although the percentage of teacher agreement continued to be milder than that of principals, supervisors and

elementary teachers. And not all respondents were positive. In fact, numerous teachers felt sufficiently strong about the issue to contribute their objections in writing. Teachers who submitted written comments seemed particularly concerned about the effect of heterogeneous grouping on the outcomes for high ability/high achieving students. One elementary school teacher wrote:

> I feel that the higher level students lose interest and impetus waiting for the slower students to complete the assignments. I speak from personal experience on that issue. Lower achieving students need smaller classes and more in-depth instruction in many areas. I feel that a good compromise that includes learning from others and instruction tailored to needs would include 2-3 days in a heterogeneous group, then regrouping for 2-3 days in a more homogeneous group for specialized instruction as needed.

A high school teacher echoed this concern:

> Mixed classes bring down the quality of education in our schools. It is not fair that a second grader reading at the sixth grade level be forced to continue reading at second grade level or a second grader struggling at first grade reading level be forced to try to read at second grade reading level. That brings down self-esteem for all groups involved.

Another teacher said this:

> Advanced students suffer because the material is often watered down so as not to fail the lower students. In my opinion, heterogeneous grouping is a way to save money by cramming more students into the classroom—fewer ESE students and specialists are needed—and small "slow" classes can be eliminated.

Similarly, a high school teacher wrote:

> The high school principals are receiving extra state monies for numbers of students moved up from 'basic' classes to 'regular' classes and 'regular' classes to 'advanced' classes. Principals are doing this only to get state monies and not because students are scoring higher or getting a better education. It is a way of mixing students in the hope of better students tutoring poorer (remedial) students in the hope of raising overall test scores.

Another said:

> I feel that we place so much emphasis on students who have various learning problems that we are not helping those students who are high average and above. I do feel that we should do everything to help students with learning problems that we can, but not at the expense of those without learning problems . Our above average students have suffered tremendously through heterogeneous grouping.

And once more:

> Ability grouping is the only way to organize. If we define learning as "one step beyond that which you already know," then we must ability group to promote appropriate instruction. The theory that students will learn from the others despite lack of skills/knowledge is not based in reality. Education in our state is moving backwards—not challenging our brightest and over-extending our lower achieving students just to give the illusion that 'we are all the same.

Not all comments were in this vein, however. Several respondents offered written responses which were equally fervent, though opposite in their perceptions. One principal, for example, wrote:

> High ability students do not achieve at any <u>better rate</u> that lower ability students. Lower level courses

promote lower level thinking and expectations on the part of the instructor. Ability grouping is a tool for resegregating schools and fosters 'elitism.'

A similar pattern emerged on the statement for Question 12C, "mixed classes are fairer and more equitable." A substantial majority of the total group (76.6%) agreed with the statement, and 23.4% disagreed. The pattern observed in earlier questions continued here, with 58.2% of teachers agreeing, 79.6% of school principals and 87.5% of central office supervisors also agreeing. In response to the statement that "lower level students have increased self-esteem in heterogeneous classes," 78.6% of the total group agreed, 21.4% disagreed. Teachers agreed at 67.3%, principals at 79.2%, and supervisors at 87%. Question 12E asked participants to respond to the statement "teacher preparation is different but not necessarily more difficult" in heterogeneous classes. Here again, a majority of the total group agreed (63.6%). A slight majority of teachers agreed (53.2%), along with 71.1% of principals and 63% of supervisors. Florida educators' opinions about heterogeneous grouping for instruction are clearly positive insofar as these items are concerned.

Public school practitioners frequently report that the single most daunting barrier to the transition to heterogeneous classrooms is the resistance received from parents. Question 13 attempted to determine the parental objections which are most frequently voiced to educators considering the transition. Respondents were to react to five specific potential parental objections, as to the extent "parents in your district would [offer] it as a rationale for opposing nonability grouping."

Question 13A, for example, asked respondents to agree or disagree as to the likelihood of parents objecting to heterogeneous grouping because "it is unfair to top students." As a total group, 76.4% of the respondents agreed that this is a statement that parents would be likely to offer, insofar as nonability grouping is concerned. Question 13B asked whether parents were likely to say that "my child will not relate to 'those kids.' " A modest majority of Florida educators, 56.5%, agreed that their parents were likely to make such a statement. For Question 13C, 74% agreed that parents were likely to say that "heterogeneous grouping dilutes instruction" students receive. Parents are also likely to argue that "teachers will have more discipline problems" with heterogeneous grouping, said 57.1% of Florida educators. Educators did not, however, expect to hear parents argue

that "students should be grouped according to career goals." Only 43.6% of educators agreed that this is a statement parents would support.

A number of respondents wrote anecdotally about the challenges of parental involvement in restructuring the school. These are representative:

> We have tried to change the grouping patterns and have met with extreme opposition from parents. Our middle school persevered and lost students to a private school.

> Getting our 'elite' parents to understand heterogeneous grouping was one of the more difficult challenges I have ever had.

> Parents of high achieving students are opposed to heterogeneous grouping. They are accustomed to their students having the best teachers and smaller classes.

The Mechanics of Grouping

There was considerable agreement on the procedures for identification and placement of children into ability groups. Question 10, for example, asked respondents to check the way in which the "school assigns students to ability groups." Of those responding, 70.8% agreed that it was done by subject area, rather than by grade level, team, or some other way.

A section of questionnaire items was addressed specifically to those educators who were working in or with schools where some degree of ability grouping was presently in place. If the school(s) in the respondents' lives "grouped students for exceptional student education only, and almost all regular classes use heterogeneous groupings" they were asked to omit Questions 17-30. Approximately one-third of the respondents returned the questionnaire without answering these items. The remaining two thirds of the respondents who answered Questions 17-30, then, were those who were involved in some level of ability grouping in their school(s).

On Question 17, 80.1%, agreed that "the organization of students

into ability groups [in their schools] is primarily determined by standardized testing and/or classroom performance related to grades." A simple majority of residents (53.2%) perceived methods such as parent requests, teacher and counselor recommendations as also being used for grouping (Question 18). Thus, in the state of Florida, educators believe that the most prevalent method that determines student placement in classes is standardized testing and grades, with other considerations used less frequently. A majority of teachers, principals, and supervisors (67%) rejected the notion that "some students are placed in low groups because of disciplinary reasons rather than ability (Question 19)." Looking at it from the reverse, however, about one-third of this group reported that they believed that this was the case, that some students were placed in certain groups because of their behavior. A sizable majority (80%) of respondents also disagreed with the notion that "family income or social class" was a significant factor in grouping (Question 20). The idea that upper income students are placed in higher groups and lower income students were placed, in inordinate numbers, in low groups was not endorsed by these respondents. The majority (64.6%) did agree, however, that "once a student is placed in an ability group, it is unusual for the student to move to a different level during the same school year (Question 22)." Furthermore, a similar number agreed (65%) that "once a student has completed one to two years in the same level ability group, the student is usually 'tracked' at that level for future years (Question 23)." On this item, supervisors were in greater agreement (82.3%) than were teachers (52.2%) or principals (55.5%).

Respondents were asked to assess several other aspects of the way ability grouping worked in their schools. Questions 24 and 25, for example, dealt with the issue of whether assignment to ability groups reflected racial and ethnic compositions in ways that might be disproportionate. There was disagreement among respondents representing schools engaged in ability grouping. A slight majority (54.1%) rejected the notion that "minority students seem to be placed in low tracks in disproportionately high numbers," where 45.9% agreed with that statement. Teachers (67.4%) and principals (72.8%) disagreed with the statement, but a small majority of central office supervisors agreed (58%).

Cross tabulations revealed some interesting patterns on both questions (24, 25). Responses of high school teachers, for example,

indicated that they agreed (64.3%) that minorities are disproportionately tracked. It might be that racial identification of students in the various high school tracks is more readily observable. When responses were examined according to the racial and socioeconomic composition of the schools, additional differences appeared. Teachers in middle and upper income, majority culture schools rejected the statements that race and ethnic minorities were disproportionately placed in lower tracks (74%) and that nonminority students were disproportionately placed in higher tracks (71%). However, central office supervisors connected to these schools agreed with the statements in questions 24 (64%) and 25 (57%), indicating that they did see race and ethnic relationships involved with track placement in these schools.

Teachers in schools with African American and Hispanic populations were less likely to reject the notions of racial and ethnic correlations with track placement. Teachers in these schools were split almost equally on their agreement or disagreement with Questions 24 and 25. School principals in racially and ethnically diverse schools tended to reject the notion of bias in track placement, but a majority of district personnel (64%) involved with these schools agreed that race and ethnicity influence track placement in ways that do not reflect the numbers of the students in the schools.

School locale was also related to the responses to these two questions. A majority of teachers (60%) in urban, big city schools agreed that nonminority students are placed in higher tracks in numbers out of proportion to their representation in the schools (Question 25). School principals, however, consistently rejected the notion of racial and ethnic bias, regardless of the locale of the school; while supervisors of these schools reacted in exactly the opposite way, with a majority of supervisors in virtually all locales except rural schools accepting the statements in Questions 24 and 25.

With these exceptions, however, respondents from individual schools tended to reject the notion that minority students were placed in low groups, or nonminorities in high tracks, more often than their numbers in the school suggested might be the case; central office supervisors with responsibility for the district as a whole tended to believe that minority students may be in the low tracks in inordinately high numbers.

As a total group, a majority (58.1%) of practitioners in Florida schools involved in ability grouping rejected the notion that nonmi-

nority students "seem to be placed in high track classes in disproportionately high numbers." This left 41.9%, however, agreeing that such practices did occur in their schools. Here again, school level practitioners (teachers and principals) disagreed with the statement while central office supervisors agreed that minority and majority culture status may play a role in ability grouping. High school teachers continued to report seeing nonminority students involved in higher track placements in numbers that go beyond their demographic representation in the school population. There seems to be substantial disagreement, in schools where ability grouping is practiced, as to whether race and ethnic group status figures into the identification and placement processes in ways which might cause some concern.

Two questions (26 and 27) dealt with the degree to which assignments of teachers to various ability groups might be based on factors which would favor a particular group of teachers or students. Asked whether or not "teachers with experience and/or reputations for good teaching seem to be assigned more often to classes with high achieving or gifted/talented students," respondents from situations in which ability grouping was occurring disagreed with each other. Taken as a whole, a slight majority of the respondents (56.3%) agreed with the statement, and 43.7% disagreed. Within professional roles, however, division occurred. Only 43.4% of the teachers agreed that teaching assignments might be skewed in this fashion, whereas 56.5% of the principals said that assignments were made this way, and 75.6% of central office supervisors agreed that experience and expertise influenced the placement of able teachers with high achieving or gifted/talented students. In Question 27, the obverse, a very small majority (51.3%) of the total respondents rejected the notion that "teachers with less experience or who may be perceived as less effective seem to be assigned more often to classes with remedial or basic students, and 48.7% asserted that they believed this to be the case. Professional role again made a difference: teachers and principals rejected the notion that such practices occurred in their schools, but 75.6% of the county-level supervisors believed that it did occur.

Question 30, the final question in the survey, asked respondents involved in ability grouping to agree or disagree with the statement, "Although current research supports heterogeneous classrooms, it is not 'reality based.'." Among the total group, 60.3% disagreed with this statement, 39.7% agreed; signaling support for the research on

ability grouping and its conclusions. Looking within professional roles, however, revealed substantial differences in opinions: 63% of teachers agreed that the research was not "reality based," with secondary teachers more firmly rejecting the findings of educational research. The other two groups took the opposite view, principals (65.9%) and central office supervisors (73%) disagreeing with the statement that research was "not 'reality based.' " Confidence in educational research, in this matter at least, appears related to the role one plays in the school system and the level of the school.

A number of respondents wrote comments about the status of research on ability grouping and about this survey in particular. Several wrote supportively about this project and other research on ability grouping, and the assistance the studies and summaries had provided for them in their change efforts. Others had a different opinion on the value of research on ability grouping in general and this survey in particular. One wrote:

> Someday someone will design a questionnaire that is bias free. This one is not it. The author supports heterogeneous grouping so bad he/she can taste it. Whatever conclusions anyone makes from this survey will not be valid ones.

Another said:

> Some of the questions seem 'loaded' to achieve results which favor heterogeneous grouping. I feel total heterogeneous grouping can be just as dangerous as total homogeneous grouping. Both methods should be used with all students. If one teaching strategy isn't good for all kids, why would one grouping strategy be best for everyone?

One elementary school principal departed substantially from the views of his or her peers, commenting:

> Current research 'findings' are not based on reality; rather, they are based on researchers' biases against ability grouping. This is a reflection of the left-wing bias of college instructors. We must either provide

ability grouping for the children who will 'carry the load' when they are adults, or this nation will continue down the road to mediocrity.

Summary and Conclusions

Summary

This study examined two areas: the practice of ability grouping in Florida, as perceived by a sample of Florida teachers, principals, and central office supervisors; and the beliefs of Florida educators about the efficacy and equity of ability grouping in this state. Respondents were asked to estimate the extent of ability grouping in their schools, the ways in which ability grouping was used, and their own beliefs about the practice. We believe that the results of the survey offer a number of important insights.

If, for example, the perceptions of Florida educators accurately reflect and report the practice of ability grouping in the schools of the state, then it appears that a large number of Florida schools engage in the practice of ability grouping in substantial portions of the school day. Although precise statements about the degree to which the practice is utilized are impossible in a survey of this nature, it does seem safe to say that only a small group of Florida school students (less than 20%) experience no ability grouping during their school day, and that of this number, almost all are in elementary schools. As many as 80% of Florida's elementary, middle level, and high school students may spend important parts of their school day learning in classes organized according to perceived ability or prior achievement. It may be that as many as one-third of Florida's students spend all or almost all of their day in groups or classes organized by ability or prior achievement.

Identification and placement procedures appear to fit what one might expect. Standardized tests, teacher recommendations, grades, and other methods are utilized to identify students for various ability groups. Students are usually placed into ability groups organized along subject lines, with various levels of math and reading in the elementary school, and much more comprehensive placements in middle and high schools. Once students are placed in such groups, the majority of Florida educators see little opportunity for students

to move from one group to another during the same school year. Once a student has completed a year or more in a particular level, many Florida educators believe that the student is usually "tracked" at that level for future years.

With some notable exceptions, a majority of Florida educators do not report perceived abuses of the identification and placement process related to race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. A majority of educators do believe, it seems, that teachers with more experience or reputations for good teaching are placed more often with classes containing high ability or gifted students. Florida educators are less likely to agree with the corollary that less effective or less experienced teachers are assigned to lower tracks.

The extent to which students experience ability grouping appears to depend upon the level of the school they attend. Elementary schools are organized in an ability grouping format far less frequently and less comprehensively than are high schools. Middle level schools, as one might expect, fall in the middle in the use of ability grouping. The "common school" disappears very quickly when students leave the elementary school in Florida. In Florida's high schools, it seems that students are very quickly divided into vocational, general, or college-preparatory tracks, and that within the college-preparatory tracks, ability grouping is used to provide leveling in most subjects that separate courses are offered for regular, honors, and advanced placement.

Nearly half of the respondents indicated that their school had recently been organized to incorporate greater heterogeneity into the program. Over half of the schools had not done so, and were not considering such a move. Of those that had been involved in such a change, the support for the move to heterogeneity was very positive, more than 85% indicating their approval. Yet, a majority of respondents believed that other teachers in their schools supported a more homogeneous model. More than 85% agreed, however, that many more teachers would be willing to move to heterogeneous groupings if they were given proper planning time, reasonable class sizes, and effective staff development.

A majority of Florida educators, in this survey, reject the following statements of beliefs about the practice of ability grouping (percent rejecting in parentheses):

1. Students learn better if they learn with others with similar capabilities (67.6).
2. Slower children develop poor self-concepts when placed with brighter children (80.7).
3. Ability grouping is usually fair and equal (71.6).
4. Ability grouping increases student achievement (74.2).

A majority of Florida educators accept the following statements of beliefs about the practice of ability grouping:

1. Ability grouping reduces the complexity of the teaching task related to student diversity (67.9).
2. Students learn from peers with different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (92.9).
3. Higher level students do as well in mixed classes as in homogeneous settings (74.4).
4. Mixed classes are fairer and more equitable (76.6).
5. Lower level students have increased self-esteem in heterogeneous classes (78.6).
6. Teacher preparation is different [in heterogeneous classes] but not necessarily more difficult (63.6).

Florida educators receive a great deal of support for homogeneous grouping, and opposition to heterogeneous grouping, from parents of high ability, high-achieving children. Educators perceive these parents as concerned about the fairness of heterogeneous groupings for "top students," as being apprehensive about their children relating to children who are substantially different. Parents of these high ability students are concerned about the "dilution of instruction" and the increase of discipline problems which might occur in mixed-ability classes.

Conclusions

It is difficult to know for certain the degree of credence one should place in information gathered through surveys of this sort. Researcher biases may shape the responses and conclusions, as several respondents suggested. Participants' responses may be influenced by what they perceive to be "acceptable" practices from professional educators; being "politically correct" is important today. Answering

questions about one's own school may be influenced by personal pride or other motives. Clearly, professional roles also influence the ways in which educators perceive the practice of ability grouping in the state of Florida and the beliefs they hold about such practices. In this survey elementary educators returned the questionnaire in greater numbers than either middle or high school educators, thus their anti-ability grouping stance may have skewed the results toward a more positive interpretation than data from a different survey might yield. In the absence of other data, however, attention must be paid to what does exist. Several important conclusions seem, to us, to be worth considering.

First, however the data are interpreted, it seems clear that there is a substantial amount of ability grouping going on in the schools of Florida, but there are deep divisions among Florida educators regarding the extent and the efficacy of the practice. Elementary educators are, in general, both much more involved in heterogeneous grouping and rejecting of ability grouping, while high school educators are far more involved in tracking and in the endorsement of the practice. Teachers report the practice of ability grouping to be far more comprehensive than do principals and supervisors, and teachers give considerably more support to homogeneous grouping than do educators more distant from the classroom. Yet, as a group, Florida educators seem to support more inclusive classrooms and schools. Continuing dialogue and communication between and among these groups of educators would contribute to building a professional consensus regarding the practice of ability grouping in Florida schools.

Second, we are alarmed at the number of Florida educators who perceived racial, ethnic, behavioral, and socioeconomic irregularities in the practice of ability grouping. After eliminating those respondents who reported that they did not practice substantial amounts of ability grouping in their schools and leaving the responses only of those involved in ability grouping, one might speculate that these responses would be more supportive of the practice in general since only those practicing ability grouping were answering. Even with this subsample of the reporting group, however, nearly a third of all the respondents indicated that they perceived that some students were placed in low groups in their school because of disciplinary problems rather than ability. More than 45% agreed that in their school minority students were placed into low-track classes

in disproportionately high numbers. A similar percentage (41.9%) agreed that nonminority students seemed to be placed in high-track classes in disproportionately high numbers. Even though teachers and principals in schools serving mostly majority culture, upper middle class students see few complications with race and ethnicity and group/track placement, this picture is not nearly so clearly painted by the responses from other Florida educators.

More than half of these respondents agreed that the "good" teachers were assigned more often to higher level classes, and almost the same number (48.7%) perceived situations in which less effective teachers were placed with low-track classes more frequently than would seem to be justified by an equitable distribution of the teaching talent in the school. If, indeed, somewhere near half of Florida's schools are placing students and assigning teachers in this fashion, the state has a serious problem with ability grouping as it is being practiced.

We believe that efforts to move Florida's school program in the direction of greater heterogeneity are perceived as highly desirable by many educators in the state, but that such efforts risk almost certain defeat, unless several important factors are considered. Florida teachers seem, for the most part, to be uncomfortable with the effects of ability grouping as it is currently practiced, but highly uncertain abut the efficacy of proposed alternatives and they are apprehensive about their ability to perform confidently and competently in the heterogeneous classroom. They are not certain that the available staff development will provide them with the skills they need, or that overcrowded and underfunded conditions at school will not defeat their efforts to attend to diversity in the classroom.

Educators report that parents of high ability students, from majority culture, upper income families Florida are opposed, in great numbers, to any changes in the public schools which might jeopardize their children's academic success. These parents believe that homogeneous grouping is in their children's best interest. Current attempts to move toward greater heterogeneity may be unlikely to survive the pressure such parents may bring to bear.

All students, including gifted and talented students of course, deserve to receive effective instruction in a challenging curriculum. Without detracting from the importance of achieving equity in education, no individual student should be expected to sacrifice an excellent education so that others might do better. Education must

not become a "zero sum game" in which students of any caliber achieve well at the expense of others' learning. Most Florida educators have heard parents describe their frustration over situations in which their high-ability, high-achieving youngsters sit through hour after hour of classes in which they are asked to work on content they have already mastered, act as tutors to those who have not, or otherwise waste their time. We must find ways for high-ability, high-achieving learners to do their very best in the context of an "inclusive school" characterized by diversity and heterogeneity. We must find ways for "at risk" students to achieve at least the minimum expectations of the school without placing the learning of others at risk or their own self-esteem and life aspirations in jeopardy. And we must find ways for the student in the middle school, the so-called average student, to receive the same quality education and advantages as do the students at either extreme.

Failure to meet these goals will result not only in the inability of the public school to achieve greater inclusivity, it may prevent public education in Florida from achieving its mission. It could even result in the rupture of social relationships in and outside of the school in ways which will further divide and defeat our state in its quest to establish the conditions for the "good life" for us all. We must not permit this to happen.

The good news is that alternatives which will permit the emergence of inclusive classrooms and schools are now being pioneered by courageous practitioners in all parts of the country. The results of research and experience are being examined. Options are being explored, and strategies for their implementation are moving forward. Dozens of schools and several entire school districts have moved away from rigid ability grouping. In the coming decade, we must learn together new ways for having our students learn together.

References on Tracking & Ability Grouping

Listed below are references which, taken as a whole, present what we believe is a balanced perspective on the topic of ability grouping. Some are research, some reflections, some methodologies. Others are spirited arguments in favor of more inclusive classrooms, while we have also included and identified references which are very much opposed to eliminating ability grouping or represent focused advocacy of the needs of a particular group, most often gifted and talented learners. We believe that school leaders should make all the relevant literature available to all interested parties. Ultimately, educators must make up their own minds about the practice of ability grouping in Florida and what must be done about it, and this means a commitment to examining the literature independently.

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*Starred references are those with a primary focus in support of ability grouping.

[1]The definition of the terms "tracking" and "ability grouping" in this manuscript is adopted from J.E. Rosenbaum (1976). *Making inequality. The hidden curriculum of high school tracking.* New York: Wiley and Sons, Publishers, p.6. Used interchangeably, the terms refer to "any school selection system that attempts to homogonize curriculum placements in terms of students' personal qualities, performances, or aspirations." Generally, however, term "tracking" has more applicability at the high school level, where curriculum tracks are more predominant than in the elementary and middle level schools where "between-class ability grouping" seems more accurate.

[2]Much of this section was prepared initially for George, P. (in press). *How to Untrack Your School.* Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

[3]For more information on what we believe to be an excellent publication on this subject, contact the office of Lee Shiver, Chief of the Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education, Division of Public Schools, Florida Department of Education, Florida Education Center, Room 348, Tallahassee, FL 32399.

[4]For more information about the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, contact SPSS, Inc., 444 Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611.